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# The Man in the Wagon

# THE MAN IN THE WAGON

by

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When I first heard this story, I was about eight years old. Sick in bed, I had begun to feel better and asked my Grandmother Louise, whom I called "Danny," to tell me a story.

"What kind of story? A true one, or a pretend-one?"

"Tell me about when you were a little girl."

And this is how she began:

As you know I was born before the Civil War. I was a little bitty girl when Abraham Lincoln was president. The War was a terrible thing, kin fighting against kin sometimes.

When it was all over soldiers wanted nothing so much but to get home, and start their lives over again. They wanted to forget what they had been through. But there were some who loved to fight and scrap and steal—they wanted to prey on the people, tear around and get into meanness.

These men were maurauders, what some people called Renegades and Carpetbaggers. For several years they went 'round the country scarin' everybody—lootin', robbin' and takin' all they could grab. People's savin's and little treasures and keepsakes they had no right to. Sometimes they killed folks, if they protested. Then they'd burn their houses down, just for pure cussedness.

My Daddy was a mild mannered man, but he had a will of iron. He knew friends who'd been set upon by these men, and it made him pretty mad. Just to think about it got his dander up! So he taught all of us how to use firearms, and to shoot straight and true—me, along with my brothers. This was for protection, in case of trouble. The guns were kept oiled and loaded in a gun-case down the hall. But there was one that wasn't locked up. This was kept in the closet near the front door.

Danny paused here . . .

Well, honey, this time I'm thinking about was on a hot summer day in late August. Now you know how hot that can be—a Kentucky August. My mother had gone that morning with all the younger children to visit her folks and stay all night with them. Ben and Barry drove them. The cooks had finished their work and gone home early. Some of our people were 'way off across the fields, pickin' blackberries from bushes that grew along the fences. These berries were big-uns, and would be canned or made into delicious jam.

My father and I were alone in the house this early afternoon. We were in the front room; he at his desk, workin' on his account books. I was busy knittin' a sock. There was an ole blue bottle fly buzzin' on the half-open window. Though it was a hot day, we were cool inside—cool and peaceful. I liked being there with my father 'cause it wasn't often he was in the house, bein' so busy all the time with work that had to be done outdoors. Yes, it was very pleasant, being quiet like we were.

Suddenly we heard a noise—the clatter of a team and wagon comin' up the road, with the trace-chains a-rattlin'. Then the sound of horses and riders approaching. They drew up in front of the house and stopped. We saw through the window that the wagon was driven by a big heavy-set man with a black beard and a raggedy ole soldier's hat. He was a mean lookin' feller, and my father whispered, "Renegades!"

There were two men on horseback behind the wagon. We saw that all three men were armed. The man in the wagon hollered out, "Hello! Hello in there! We know you're home. Come on out chere!"

"Uh-ho, Lou," my father said, "this means trouble!" He took his time opening the front door, and left it about six inches ajar. He walked slowly, but with assurance, out to the edge of the verandah . . . then stopped.

"Well, sir, what is it you want?" While my father stood there, I rushed to the closet and took out the gun. Then I ran back and hid behind the front door, lookin' through the cracks where the hinges were. The Big Man laughed and said, "Wada I want? Why, you c'mrere an' see!" My father didn't budge.

"I SAID C'MERE!" he yelled. One of the men on horseback cocked his pistol. At this, my father started slowly down the steps: he was straight as a ramrod. I saw and heard all this from where I stood behind the door. My heart was pounding, but I knew what I must do if I ever got the chance. I waited. I listened.

Father was beside the wagon now. "Well, what is it? What do you want?"

The Man gave a real mean laugh. "You know what we want! Things! Supplies! Meat! An' most anything else you got! We want the keys to yo' smokehouse, an' we aim to get 'em!"

My father held his ground, lookin' him straight in the eye. He didn't say a word, but stood there—unafraid, it seemed like. The second man on horseback took out his pistol, pointing it at my father's head. There was nothing for it but to do as he'd been told. "Very well, wait here. The keys are in the house. I'll get them." He turned to come back in the house.

"If'n you ain't out chere in five minutes we all comin' in after you!"

Father didn't hurry, he just came up the steps like he'd been out talkin' to friends. When he was back on the porch, the men put up their pistols.

Just then, the Big Man stood up in the wagon to stretch himself. He pointed 'way off across the fields, off toward the berry-pickers. They were a long way from the house and couldn't see what was taking place. The riders' heads had turned in the direction he was pointing. They didn't suspect, nor see what was coming!

Here was the chance I'd been waiting for. With my father safely out of range, I raised the gun to my shoulder, put the muzzle through the space the door had left ajar. Then I carefully took a bead on that Big Man's fat behind!

Danny laughed as she remembered . . .

Then I pulled the trigger, and shot his coat-tails plumb off! He was the most surprised feller you ever did see! His team lunged, nearly jumpin' out of their harness. He was thrown back on his seat—and he sat down, HARD! Well sir, that wagon took out down the road, lickety-split, like the devil was after it.

The riders' horses reared up, then plunged forward, gallopin' down the road after the wagon. Now I stepped out on the porch, and gave 'em a parting blast, for good luck!

We just stood there watchin' them till they were only three black specks caught up in a whirlwind of billowing, yellow dust. Then my father laid his hand on my shoulder. "You'll do all right for yourself, Lou," was all he said.

He took the gun out of my hand, and we went on back indoors. Going to the closet, he replaced the gun. No more was said. He just walked back to his desk and began on his account books again, as though nothing had happened.

Danny rocked awhile, then she finished . . .

My father was very courageous man. He was always calm in a crisis.

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Danny's father was James Adrian Grogan, and her mother Julia Ann (Juliet) Martin Grogan. They had thirteen children, eleven boys and two girls: Louisa Euen Grogan who married James Bryant Hicks, and Frosie Grogan who married John Crittendon Hicks. Sisters married brothers.